Introduction: Social Movements and Democratization in Indonesia

Thushara Dibley and Michele Ford

In 1998, thousands of students occupied the Indonesian parliament, sleeping rough at night, chanting slogans and singing songs demanding the resignation of the man who had led Indonesia for more than three decades. Their elation at President Suharto’s announcement of his resignation on May 21 was echoed in the headlines of newspapers around the world. The activists who staged protests at this critical moment precipitated one of the most significant shifts in Indonesia’s political landscape since independence. The ensuing transition was tumultuous, with race riots, threats of separatism, and destruction of public and private property. But before long the country had settled into a period of democratic consolidation, which continued without major incident until Prabowo Subianto, a retired general accused of human rights abuses and Suharto’s former son-in-law, threatened a return to a more authoritarian form of government in his campaign for president in the 2014 election. The immediate threat to the country’s formal commitment to democracy was averted when Prabowo accepted his narrow defeat to Joko Widodo (Jokowi), the serving governor of Jakarta. Along the way, however, Indonesia’s political culture had shifted considerably—with the progressive voices that had been so influential in 1998 increasingly displaced by reactionary social movements and, in particular, conservative Islamic forces.

Activists in Transition responds to Della Porta’s (2014, 363) call “to single out the effects of democratic transformations on social movements [and] the effects of social movements on those transformations.” It focuses on social movements with progressive agendas because these, and not their conservative counterparts, have imagined and articulated a democratic vision for Indonesia. Studies of regime change have shown that progressive social movements disseminate ideas about democracy among the wider population and mobilize opposition to undemocratic regimes (Adler and Webster 1995; Collier and Mahoney 1997; Tilly 2001). Less attention has been paid to the fate of social movements once that regime change occurs. In Grodsky’s (2012, 12) words, “Scholars and policymakers who focus on democratization have accumulated a wealth of information on how social movements arise [but the] question of ‘what next?’ has . . . been largely pushed to the side.”

This collection explores what went before and the “what next,” tracking the trajectory of social movements’ engagement in the political sphere from the short-lived period of openness (keterbukaan) in the late 1980s–early 1990s and the twenty-year anniversary of the fall of Suharto’s New Order in 2018. Close consideration of progressive social movements’ different roles at different times over these three decades makes it possible to better assess their
contribution to Indonesia’s democratic transition, thus sharpening our analysis of the dynamic relationship between political elites and various social actors at times of social and political change. It also sheds light on the impact of democratization on those movements as they reinvent themselves in an attempt to maintain or increase their influence in a new democratic polity.

This introductory chapter begins this task by focusing on the collective contribution of progressive social movements to Indonesia’s transition to democracy and their collective fate in the decades since, setting the scene for the case studies to follow. First, however, we must explain how we understand the relationship between social movements and democratization.

Social movements and democratization

Social movements consist of networks involving a diverse range of actors, including individuals, groups, or organizations that may be loosely connected or tightly clustered. These networks are defined by “shared beliefs and solidarity,” which form the basis of collective action that seeks to “promote or oppose social change” (Diani 1992, 8–11). Progressive social movements are those that espouse a vision of society that is open and inclusive, treats all its citizens with respect, and provides them with equal access to civil and political rights. The idea of a “progressive” movement is not without its problems, as it—like the concept of democracy itself—enshrines a rights-based paradigm that emerged from the West. Even setting this caveat aside, assessments of whether or not a movement can be considered progressive depends on the perspective from which that judgment is made.¹ Fundamentalist religious movements may promote social change, for example, by creating more legal and social space for adherents to practice their religion as they see fit. They are thus clearly social movements. But it is a relatively straightforward exercise to exclude them from the “progressive” category since they so often impinge on the ability of women, sexual minorities, and people of other faiths to access their civil rights. Other cases are less clear cut. For example, a local movement based on ethnic identity may be considered emancipatory by participants but chauvinistic or backward by others. While most of the social movements canvassed in this book focus on promoting the interests of a particular group defined by class, gender, or other elements of identity, all are progressive in the sense that they envisage an inclusive society rather than one that privileges particular groups.

Democratization, meanwhile, is a process through which a polity moves toward “a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives” (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 76). The trajectory of democratization depends on the historical, political, and social context of the country concerned, and is seldom linear. Dramatic moments of regime change, such as that experienced by Indonesia in 1998, are just one of many aspects of that trajectory. Such moments are preceded by a series of developments that lay the foundations for political upheaval and followed by a period during which democratic institutions are constructed and democratic cultures established. What is more, the attainment of meaningful citizenship is a process that occurs unevenly, can retreat, and requires persistent work to sustain even in established democracies (Grugel 2013). The work of maintaining advances toward meaningful citizenship is necessarily far more taxing in an emerging democracy like Indonesia.

In locating progressive social movements at the center of our analysis, we do not seek to privilege them to the exclusion of elite proponents of democracy (cf. Stepan 1997). Rather,
we draw attention to this particular element of what Threlfall (2008, 932) describes as the “co-construction” of democratization by multiple actors, including powerful individuals and the “organized and non-organized masses.” Nor do we seek to downplay the obstacles social movements face. Many have argued, following Hadiz and Robison (2014) and Winters (2014), that Indonesia is controlled by an oligarchy whose power base is rooted in predemocratic times—and even assessments that challenge the fatalism of such accounts acknowledge the ongoing influence of long-established political and economic elites (Ford and Pepinsky 2014a). There are also deep-seated features of Indonesia’s political system that hinder democratic practice, among them clientelism, the failure of the rule of law, and the growing influence of conservative countermovements.

As Aspinall argues in the concluding chapter of this volume, it has proven difficult for progressive social movements to stand strong in the face of these challenges. Nevertheless, they have continued to fight for what Beetham (1999, 91) describes as the “basic” principles of democracy, namely “control by citizens over their collective affairs and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control.”

**Progressive social movements as a driver of democratization**

One feature of different democratic trajectories is the degree of involvement, and impact, of progressive social movements. Most relevant to the process of regime change are national social movements, which “make claims on authorities” primarily through “cumulative nonviolent action”—a category that includes “publications, meetings, marches, demonstrations, petitions, lobbying, and threats to intervene directly in formal political life” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1996, 22). Cumulative action of this kind can generate alliances with members of the political class, credibly threaten to disrupt political processes or directly influence electoral outcomes, or generate pressure from external powerholders (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1996, 22). Where it is most successful, it can shift the power relations between challengers and authorities, alter policy directions, or provoke broader systemic change (Guigni 1999, xxiii). The latter may include change in political institutions or in the social or cultural domain. In short, social movements “not only challenge state structures but also aim at redefining the sets of social relations that presuppose such structures and the symbolic elements that justify them” (Guigni 1999, xxix). All of these elements can play into—or impede—shifts toward a more democratic political system. Equally, there is no guarantee that social movements will achieve fundamental change in the political sphere even when they band together to make “explicit demands for democracy” (Tilly 1993, 22). Indeed, as Boudreau (2004, 30) reminds us, “Democracy movements rarely themselves bring down governments, and we should be wary of claims that equate democratization with strong pro-democratic-mobilization.”

At the same time, it is important not to dismiss the contribution of progressive social movements to regime change, as the Indonesian experience attests (Aspinall 2005). Efforts to draw general conclusions about their contribution across different national contexts are relatively rare. In one such attempt, Rossi and Della Porta (2015, 18–24) draw on their assessments of developments in Latin America and Southern and Eastern Europe to argue that the role played by social movements evolves through different phases of the democratization process, namely resistance, liberalization, transition, and expansion. During the resistance phase, social movements develop underground networks that are critical to “undermining the legitimacy of the regime” (Rossi and Della Porta 2015, 18). These
networks introduce and enact democratic values through their modes of interaction with one another and their constituents—in doing so, contributing to the creation of an alternative vision for the political culture, and thus undermining the authoritarian regime. In this way, as Rossi and Della Porta (2015, 18–19) argue, social movements become “effective promoters of democratic values and understandings that erode a non-democratic regime and set the necessary conditions for liberalization to take place.”

The key characteristic of the next phase, liberalization, is an acceleration of change leading to “the perception among the authoritarian elites that there is no other way than to open the regime if they want to avoid civil war or violent takeover” (Rossi and Della Porta 2015, 21). As this period begins, social movement actors may engage in overt protest alone or in conjunction with their international allies. Equally, they may push back in less obvious ways that nevertheless undermine the regime. Where activists collectively gain momentum, political elites may be forced to make concessions, for example, by easing restrictions on oppositional organizations or taking a less punitive approach to demonstrations. As a consequence, social movements that previously had limited opportunity to organize or engage in public demonstrations experience a freeing of political space and new opportunities for public action. In this way, liberalization creates an environment in which social movements can exert further pressure on the regime as “organized society becomes more visible” (Rossi and Della Porta 2015, 21).

Increased social movement activity generates momentum and creates opportunities for key individuals and organizations to establish themselves as regime critics, in some circumstances culminating in the formation of a coalition for regime change. A successful transition generally requires the mobilization of a broad-based prodemocracy coalition with the power to trigger regime change. Once procedural democracy is achieved, this coalition may be demobilized. Alternatively, activists may continue to play a role in a fourth stage, which Rossi and Della Porta (optimistically) describe as expansion. Importantly, the success or failure of this phase is not measured by the conduct of free and fair elections, but rather by the “universal and effective application of citizenship rights, which transcend voting” (Rossi and Della Porta 2015, 24). These more robust indicators of democracy are particularly important for movements concerned with issues of identity and representation such as the movements for women’s, gay and lesbian, or disability rights because they suggest that democratic consolidation is more accurately measured by the attitudes toward and treatment of all citizens, rather than just electoral procedures.

This framework provides a useful starting point because it offers a pathway for thinking about the relationship between the actions taken by social movements and phases of the broad trajectory of democratization. However, it suggests a degree of inevitability—reminiscent of Rostow’s (1960) five stages of growth—that is belied by the messiness of the democratic project. For example, Rossi and Della Porta (2015) touch only lightly on the potential for breakdown in the democratization process. They indicate that the absence of a large coalition of social movements during the transition phase can make it difficult to achieve regime change because conservative forces or powerful elites opposed to democratization are able to derail the process. But their analysis does not account for contexts in which governments seek to contain social movements by creating opportunities for their participation in the policy sphere without committing to a broader process of democratization (Rodan 2018). Nor do they consider situations in which democracies that have entered into a period of
consolidation then begin to regress. Social movements’ experience of such situations is
different from that in the resistance phase because they have already experienced success and
have worked to adjust their institutional structures and strategies to the new demands of
operating in a democracy. In the face of systemic changes associated with democratic
regression, progressive social movements must again reassess their priorities, strategies, and
institutional structures—and in many cases, their fundamental purpose—if they are to
continue to mobilize successfully for social change.

Another limitation of the broad-brush approach taken by Rossi and Della Porta (2015) is that
it fails to account for dynamics within individual social movements and in the relationship
between individual social movements and the state. In transitional democracies, social
movements must deal with a common set of challenges that may include excessive
surveillance, the failure of the rule of law, or unnecessarily punitive requirements for the
formation of social movement organizations or new political parties. However, the relative
impact of these and other aspects of a country’s political and social context on individual
movements is different, as clearly evidenced in the case of Indonesia. For instance, the
demands of the environmental movement were much more palatable to Suharto’s government
than those of the labor movement in the early 1980s (Ford 2009). Similarly, the rise of
religious conservatism in the post-Suharto period is of much more significance to gay and
lesbian activists than, for example, to activists in the anticorruption movement. The
differential impact of broader political and social developments, as well as social movements’
internal dynamics, account for the success or failure of particular movements to prosecute
their cause.

Engagement with a democratic state

In “what shape” (Boudreau 2013, 57) do social movements emerge from the experience of
campaigning for regime change, and how do they engage with a newly democratic state?
When the goal of procedural democracy is achieved, the focus of progressive social
movements necessarily shifts. In the Philippines, Indonesia’s neighbor, social movements
experienced a fundamental change in orientation from systemic reform to more particularistic
agendas after the ousting of President Marcos (Boudreau 2013). Reflecting on the reasons for
this shift, Boudreau concludes that the broad-based democracy movement had

a short shelf life once the dictatorship’s most egregious violations of democratic
process end. In the shadow of authoritarian rule, the right to free expression or
assembly may seem luminous and sufficient. But procedural questions soon give way
to substantive matters, and populations move from expectations that democracy will
produce material benefits to more direct demands for those benefits. Pro-democracy
coalitions then divide into blocs concerned with the content of politics. (Boudreau
2013, 58)

As the Philippines experience suggests, the new political arena in which social activists find
themselves, while full of new possibilities, is also deeply challenging because it requires
social movements to move beyond campaigning for regime change to the more complex and
(sometimes) mundane negotiations involved in influencing policy once regime change has
been achieved (Foweraker 2001, 848). In Indonesia, too, most progressive social movements
found their goals much easier to define in the lead-up to the transition, when their collective
focus was on bringing down an authoritarian regime, than after the moment of regime
change. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Suharto, students struggled to define their role in a context where their calls to purge Indonesia’s political system of the New Order elite were not widely supported (Sastramidjaja, this volume). For its part, the labor movement shifted its emphasis from a narrow agenda focused on freedom of association and labor rights abuses to a broader range of issues including outsourcing and social security (Caraway and Ford, this volume).

In order to deal with their new reality, social movements develop new strategies and tactics. In some cases, mobilization continues to play an important role as democratization provides greater space for the airing of social movement concerns, or gives rise to new grievances (Friedman and Hochstetler 2002; Shin 2010). In other cases, social movements leverage more open decision-making processes to ensure their goals are reflected in governments’ policy platforms (Ballard et al. 2005). In others still, social movement actors take advantage of the introduction of electoral competition, which opens up the possibility for them to reach agreements with parties or individual candidates based on their capacity to mobilize large blocks of voters—or, indeed, to participate directly in electoral politics.\(^3\)

Indonesian activists have responded to these opportunities for direct political engagement in very different ways. Initially, many social activists avoided becoming directly involved. Over time, however, a subset came to see the electoral arena as important for social struggles. Of this latter group, some chose to stand as candidates within existing political parties while others decided to establish purpose-specific political vehicles. In some cases, activists in parliament have been able to make changes (such as the changes to quotas for women), but in many cases they have had limited influence and in a few instances have become involved in corrupt activities or become aligned with nondemocratic elites (Mietzner 2013). Others still worked outside the halls of power to influence policy and legislation. In the early days after the fall of Suharto, for example, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in environmental activism actively campaigned for the People’s Consultative Assembly to pass a policy decision on agrarian reform, which ended up occurring in 2001 (Lucas and Warren 2003). More recently, as discussed in Dibley’s chapter in this volume, disability activists played a critical role in ensuring that the disability law established during the New Order period was revised to better reflect global norms and practices. Finally, regime change affects the ways in which international funding bodies interact with social movement organizations, sometimes leading to a decrease in resources available to a movement. With the advent of democracy, many of the NGOs that had spearheaded Indonesia’s democracy movement lost much of their foreign funding. In cases where support has been lost, NGOs and other donor-funded organizations can find themselves without the material resources to continue their social movement function (Grodsky 2012). Conversely, democratization can coincide or directly result in new international funding opportunities, which can contribute to new, more vibrant forms of activism. For example, disability organizations gained access to new sources of funding after Indonesia signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In short, progressive social movement actors attempt to use the opportunities and resources available to them within the new political system to further their individual and collective agendas. Their success or failure depends on whether they have been able to develop a clear sense of their new goals and a new strategic repertoire through which to implement those
goals in sometimes very challenging environments. Social movements around the world have coped with these changes in varying ways. Some adapt, even thrive, but others do not. The reasons for these variations are as diverse as the political contexts in which different social movements operate. What is important, though, is to recognize that this process of adjustment is a normal and necessary part of the development of a new democracy, which has consequences not only for the social movements concerned but also for the quality of democracy itself.

**Indonesian social movements and democratization**

The New Order regime was born of a moment of deep disruption, which saw the destruction of a vibrant social movement landscape dominated by the Left. Prompted by an attempted coup by a group called the September 30 Movement, Suharto, then in charge of the Army’s Strategic Command, quickly seized political power in 1965 (Cribb 1990). The Indonesian Communist Party was blamed for the coup, prompting the mass murder of millions of suspected communists by vigilante groups supported by the military (Cribb 1990). The persecution of communists was further strengthened by legislation that outlawed Marxism-Leninism and that made it illegal for former political prisoners to participate in politics (Roosa 2006).

In order to cement its place in the Indonesian polity, the regime developed three key mechanisms of control: promoting Pancasila as a statist ideology, involving the military in civilian life, and amalgamating existing political parties and controlling the right to form mass organizations (Aspinall 2005). These strategies were a response not only to the specific threat of communism—which the regime invoked constantly—but to mass-based organizing more generally. The government achieved a more or less complete demobilization of society in the few short years between 1971 and 1975, reordering the political system and entrenching a series of “functional groups” for workers, peasants, fishers, youth, and women to contain the participation of constituencies formerly represented by independent social movements (Reeve 1985). For the next three decades, activists were forced to mobilize in fragmented and transitory pockets of political space not through “strongly institutionalized, deeply-rooted and resilient organizations” but rather “a kaleidoscope of small NGOs, action committees and informal networks” (Aspinall, this volume).

Developments during and after this period broadly align with the phases identified by Rossi and Della Porta (2015, 9). From the beginning of the New Order until the late 1980s—the period that aligns with Rossi and Della Porta’s resistance phase—progressive activists opposed the regime by spreading ideas and practices about democracy. They maintained gentle pressure on the regime during this period, but engaged in relatively little public protest. This changed with the advent of keterbukaan in 1989. In this period of liberalization, social movements engaged in frequent demonstrations, contributing to increased awareness of ideas about, and practices of, democracy. This sustained wave of protest was, however, largely stifled when the Indonesian government retreated into more punitive approaches to social activism in the mid-1990s.

Social movements nevertheless maintained enough momentum to take advantage of instability wrought by the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, which destroyed the legitimacy of the New Order. The impact of the crisis, and persistent protests against excesses of the regime, brought about Suharto’s resignation in May 1998 and an end to authoritarianism.
Indonesia subsequently entered a period of transition, the end of which was marked by the first direct election of an Indonesian president in 2004, which scholars heralded as marking its entry into democratic consolidation (Liddle and Mujani 2013; Mietzner 2015). However, following a short period of what Rossi and Della Porta (2015, 25) would describe as “expansion,” Indonesia’s democracy began to regress as a consequence of rising conservatism and declining space for the voices of progressive social movements.

Resistence (1965–89)

Progressive social movements had to be resilient to survive the early years of the New Order. For many, resilience meant finding ways of dealing with the regime’s changing levels of tolerance to their presence. This ability to adapt to their environment ensured their sustainability and laid the groundwork for future change (Aspinall 2005). For instance, after initially allowing students space to organize, the government dealt harshly with student protests in the late 1970s, silencing the student movement for a decade (see Sastramidjaja, this volume). In response, some student activists retreated from the public gaze, developing study groups focused on identifying “new solutions for the country’s political, social, and economic problems” (Aspinall 2005, 121). Others expressed their opposition by joining NGOs, whose structures were better suited than mass movements to a harsh political climate in which the government and military had little sympathy or support for student activism. Similarly, after the labor movement was all but destroyed in the late 1960s, the handful of stalwarts who refused to be co-opted by the regime were joined by new allies in the left of the student movement, the Catholic and Batak Lutheran churches, and human rights–based NGOs, which, in turn, mobilized a new generation of worker-activists (Ford 2009). As these examples suggest, Indonesia’s ban on mass-based organizing meant that many of the progressive social movements of this period were driven by middle-class activists, whose class position afforded them some protection from the regime.

A key tactic employed by NGOs in the 1970s was to package causes in ways that complemented government strategies rather than standing in direct opposition to the state (Hadiwinata 2003). From the 1980s, however, a new breed of NGO leaders critical of their predecessors’ failure to “develop any effective theoretical framework or strategies for change” (Eldridge 1995, 38) emerged. Whether campaigning for gender equality, educating factory workers, or supporting peasant farmers, these activists were guided by the premise that the best way to challenge the authoritarian system was to empower the marginalized and advocate for their rights (see Anugrah, Rinaldo, and Caraway and Ford, this volume). Initially through their service and organizing work, and increasingly through public advocacy campaigns—which they used to gradually “shift the ground rules of politics” and push the state to concede to their demands (Aspinall 2005, 97)—this generation of NGO activists played a critical role in disseminating democratic ideas and practices throughout society. Among the most visible examples of this phenomenon was the campaign against Kedung Ombo, a World Bank–funded dam project that became a key focus for protest actions in the mid–late 1980s, which brought together environmental groups and agrarian activists concerned about the welfare of farmers who lost their land (Stanley 1994). While these kinds of land disputes did not threaten the New Order state directly, they “added to the mounting burden faced by the regime of maintaining its aura of legitimacy” (Aspinall 2004, 82). In introducing a focus on environmental justice, these groups laid bare the limitations of the New Order regime’s developmentalist approach and proved that it was open to challenge.
Liberalization (1989–94)

Changes in geopolitics, and especially the end of Soviet isolationism, coincided with keterbukaan, which began in 1989 and lasted until mid-1994. This brief period of openness was prompted by growing tension within the regime between Suharto and the military (Crouch 1993) and pressure from foreign states less willing to accommodate authoritarian regimes as the Cold War drew to an end. During this period, controls on the press were relaxed and space became available for open public debate and widespread protest (Aspinall 1995, 25).

Social movements responded to these new opportunities by mounting a “push toward effective democracy” (Rossi and Della Porta 2015, 21). Students became increasingly focused on the needs of the poor and marginalized (Aspinall 2005, 123). They were joined in this endeavor by NGO activists and other progressive groups, whose shared aim was “empowering the powerless” (Heryanto 1988, 263). The student, labor, and land rights movements were particularly critical of the New Order’s approach to human rights and the role of the military in this period. According to Aspinall (2005, 144), students had “a major impact on the politics of keterbukaan, especially by testing and expanding the political space for new forms of protest.” Labor activists and their allies in the student and women’s movements mounted a highly visible campaign against military intervention in the labor movement after Marsinah, a young worker activist in East Java, was raped, tortured and murdered, allegedly by the military, after participating in a strike in May 1993 (Ford 2003). Activists in the land rights movement also adopted a far more radical approach than it had taken in the early 1980s, openly resisting eviction and land grabbing by the state (Anugrah, this volume).

One tactic used to maintain pressure on the regime was to work with semioppositional forces within the regime (Aspinall 2005, 9). In the late New Order, the Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia, PDI), with its direct links to Sukarno’s descendants, played an important role in generating a mass base of opposition. Another critical factor was the extent to which activists could draw on support from their allies abroad. Rossi and Della Porta (2015, 22) explain that transnational alliances can have an impact on the ability of social movements to exert influence during a period of liberalization, as was certainly the case in Indonesia. Many of the NGOs that drove human rights activism in the 1990s received funding from international foundations and were backed by foreign governments keen to promote democracy in Indonesia. NGOs and other social movement actors also used their social movement connections to raise international awareness of restrictions on civil liberties and human rights abuses, in some cases forcing the government to act (Hadiwinata 2003; Dibley 2014; Ford 2009).

There were limits to how much the regime would tolerate, however. Keterbukaan ended abruptly in June 1994, when the government revoked the publishing licenses of the important news magazines Tempo, Editor, and DeTik following the publication of stories criticizing its purchase of secondhand warships from Germany (Romano 1996). From this time, many of the concessions made during this short period of liberalization were reversed in a return of repression that—while it was not immediately obvious—marked the beginning of Indonesia’s transition to democracy.
Indonesia’s transition to democracy was a decades-long process, which began in 1994 and extended past the point of regime change to Indonesia’s first direct presidential elections in 2004. As Rossi and Della Porta observe (2015, 22), transition is necessarily characterized by “high uncertainty.” However, their model does not account for situations in which liberalization is suddenly reversed, as in the Indonesian case, with the government’s decision to wind back the freedoms it had introduced during keterbukaan. Ironically, this reversal played a decisive role in the process of transition since the return of repression engendered greater determination by social movements to push for change, giving Indonesian activists the courage to directly challenge the system in a way they had not been able to before.

A key force in this more frontal assault on the regime was the People’s Democratic Association (Persatuan Rakyat Demokratik, PRD), which was formally established in 1994. Later known as the People’s Democratic Party, the PRD consisted of students and former students who had been inspired by the work of exiled Indonesian author Prameodya Ananta Toer to organize workers in factories and other sectors as part of its ambition to build a mass movement (Lane 2008). For example, its labor wing, the Indonesian Center for Labor Struggle (Pusat Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia, PPBI), organized protests involving thousands of workers in industrial areas across Indonesia in the mid-1990s. At the same time, the PDI was slowly gaining momentum as an oppositional force. When Sukarno’s daughter Megawati Soekarnoputri made a bid to become the leader of the party in 1993, she succeeded despite Suharto’s lack of support. Her election signaled to radical student groups—including the PRD—that PDI could be a potential partner in its plans for the downfall of Suharto.

Over the ensuing years, leaders from within the PRD and other opposition forces began to work with individuals within PDI to create a large, very diverse movement for change (Aspinall 2005, 186–87). As Sastramidjaja (this volume) explains, the regime found this partnership to be “dangerously explosive,” and both organizations were targeted in a violent crackdown in 1996 when government forces stormed the offices of Megawati’s breakaway faction of PDI (Alliance of Independent Journalists 1997). The broader prodemocracy movement faced “a concerted crackdown on civilian dissent” in the lead-up to the May 1997 election (Aspinall 1997). The government’s capacity to enforce repression was, however, disrupted by the onset of the Asian financial crisis, which saw the rapid devaluation of the rupiah in the second half of 1997 and increases in inflation, unemployment, and foreign debt. The spiraling economic situation sparked a total crisis, creating the conditions for social movements to make a final and successful push for regime change.4

According to Rossi and Della Porta (2015, 22), the initial stage of transition generally involves a prodemocracy coalition of “unions, political parties, churches and social movements” which “may push for social justice and the elimination of the reserved powers that limit the emerging democracy.” In 1998 in Indonesia, the prodemocracy coalition consisted primarily of students, supported by academics, NGO activists, and middle-class women’s groups, like the Voice of Concerned Mothers (Suara Ibu Peduli), as well as some members of the political and religious elite (Aspinall 2005, 213–24). A wave of student protests reached a climax on May 12, when the military opened fire on students protesting at Jakarta’s Trisakti University, killing four of the demonstrators. The shootings were followed
by mass riots over two days in which shopping centers were destroyed, Chinese citizens were
attacked, and more than a thousand people were killed (Aspinall 2005, 232). More student
protests followed, accompanied by calls from everyone from stock exchange traders and
journalists to major Islamic organizations, and even the youth wing of the ruling party, for
Suharto to step down (Aspinall 2005, 232). These events triggered Suharto’s eventual
resignation on May 21 and, with it, the fall of the New Order. 5

Between 1999 and 2004, the country reformed its political system. Transitional president B.
J. Habibie immediately took steps to expand Indonesians’ political freedoms through
measures such as the introduction of freedom of association and freedom of expression, and
the passing of a human rights law. His presidency, and the subsequent presidencies of
Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) and Megawati (2001–4), saw the liberalization of the
party system and the introduction of competitive elections, culminating in the direct election
of the president from 2004 (Crouch 2003; Liddle and Mujani 2006). While the political
situation was not as volatile as it had been in 1998, these constant changes to the party system
and election processes meant that the ground rules for politicians and social movements alike
were in constant flux.

Another important political reform that dramatically changed the opportunities available to
social movements was the massive process of decentralization initiated in late 1999 to shore
up the new government’s legitimacy and “forestall secessionist aspirations” following the
loss of East Timor (Buehler 2010, 268–69). Laws passed in that year paved the way for the
substantial devolution of power to provincial and district leaders and the restructuring of how
government finances were allocated. In addition to “shatter[ing] the centralised state’s
monopoly over power and resources,” decentralization opened the way for greater citizen
engagement in public decision making (Antlöv 2003, 77–78). Equally, however, it created
new challenges for almost every social movement, for example, contributing to “a resurgence
of patriarchal attitudes” (Bessell 2010, 224).

As Rossi and Della Porta (2015, 23) explain, social movements may find it hard to adjust to
the new circumstances as the period of transition evolves, depending on the characteristics of
particular movements and of the political context prior to the transition. Indonesian social
movements very much followed this pattern. The student movement, progressive Islamic
groups, and the labor movement found the changes in the immediate aftermath of democracy
difficult to navigate (Sastramidjaja, Fealy, and Caraway and Ford, this volume). For different
reasons, the student movement and the progressive Islamic movement never really recovered.
By contrast, after an initial period of little activity, the labor movement developed relatively
effective strategies for leveraging a democratic and decentralized political system. For other
movements, democratization had no immediate impact. As Wilson (this volume)
demonstrates, the conditions of the urban poor, and consequently many of their everyday
resistance strategies, changed little as a result of democracy either in the early 2000s or in the
period since. Disability activism, on the other hand, was in such a nascent stage that
democratization did not have any immediate effect, although the movement later benefited
significantly from the opportunities offered by decentralization (Dibley, this volume). The
women’s, gay and lesbian, anticorruption, and land rights movements, meanwhile, found that
the opportunities of democracy initially offered them a much more conducive environment in
which to form cohesive movements, though their respective situations changed as time went
by (Anugrah, Kramer, Rinaldo, and Wijaya and Davies, this volume).
A key factor contributing to the experience of social movements in the immediate aftermath of democratization was the role of foreign aid. Progressive social movements that became the targets of foreign aid in those early years of democracy tended to experience the most growth and consolidation in the immediate aftermath of regime change. The anticorruption movement is a key example. Prior to 1998, corruption was a key theme taken up by activists in different sectors opposing the Suharto regime; however, it was not until after 1998 that foreign donors directly funded organizations whose key goals and mission were to combat corruption (Kramer, this volume). This injection of foreign funding provided the movement with the infrastructure to pursue a strong anticorruption agenda in the early days of Indonesian democracy. As this example suggests, while donor assistance, or lack of it, is by no means a firm predictor of a social movement’s performance, it can play a vital role in positioning some social movement actors to take advantages of the opportunities brought by democratization.

**Stagnation, Not Expansion (2004–)**

Indonesia’s pathway to democracy became less clear after the election of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2004. Yudhoyono served two terms as president, and was elected in a landslide in both elections. The strength of his electoral mandate, his commitment to parliamentary and judicial reform, and his efforts to limit military engagement in politics—as well as increased economic stability and declining rates of internal conflict—contributed to a sense that the country was undergoing a period of democratic consolidation (Mietzner 2015). In Rossi and Della Porta’s (2015, 24) model, this period should have given rise to an opportunity for democratic “expansion.” In the Indonesian case, however, 2004 is less a marker of consolidation than of stagnation (Tomsa 2010; Törnquist 2014; Mietzner 2015)—or even the beginning of a democratic recession. International leaders may have praised Yudhoyono for “Indonesia’s apparent embrace of the universality of human rights,” signaled by the signing of several international covenants (Berger 2015, 221). But this performance of engaging with global human rights discourse was little more than “lip-service” (Sidel 2015, 63), as during Yudhoyono’s time in office the pace of reform slowed significantly, particularly in relation to corruption, the security sector, and electoral process (Mietzner 2015).

The response of social movements during this ten-year period was mixed. As noted earlier, the student movement never really recovered. There was increased student activity in the provinces, but the increasing privatization of higher education during this period left the movement struggling (Sastramidjaja, this volume). After some significant successes during the early years of reformasi, anticorruption activists found themselves working hard to defend gains made during Yudhoyono’s presidency (Kramer, this volume). Other movements that did not fare well during this period included the progressive Islamic movement, the women’s movement, and the movement for gay and lesbian rights, which have all struggled with rising religious intolerance. More successful were the movements for land rights and the rights of the urban poor, which managed to get their issues onto the policy table, though not necessarily achieving positive outcomes (Anugrah and Wilson, this volume). Disability and labor activists, meanwhile, had considerable success using existing structures to make concrete changes to policies affecting their constituents (Dibley and Caraway and Ford, this volume). This range of experiences suggests that the overall process of democratic stagnation plays out differently depending on the sector in which a social movement is active. In other
words, it is not that social movements no longer have space to operate, but rather that
democratic stagnation has affected social attitudes and political opportunity structures related
to particular areas of concern.

The ongoing barriers to democratic “expansion” became increasingly obvious when Prabowo
declared his candidacy in the lead-up to the 2014 presidential elections. The fear of the risks
to democracy of a Prabowo government pushed many activists into the camp of Jokowi, who
pledged to respect human rights and redress past abuses (Hearman 2016). As Jokowi’s
presidency proceeded, however, the progressive social movement actors that had supported
him proved unable to hold him to account in areas including women’s and labor rights,
disability, sexuality, freedom of religion, and even economic empowerment (Muhtadi 2015).
Restrictions on the freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion
continued to hamper citizens’ right to live as they wish and activists’ efforts to organize. The
increasing prominence of conservative countermovements, but also structural changes under
decentralization, placed additional pressures on women and minority groups. Members of
minority Islamic sects, but also atheists, became an increasingly frequent target for religious
extremists. There was a rise in the number of homophobic attacks (Yulius 2017). Labor
activists, meanwhile, were subjected to increased surveillance and legitimate protest actions
were met with criminal charges, while militias continued to break up gatherings to discuss the
massacres of 1965. As Warburton (2016, 307) concludes, “Although the Jokowi
administration [did not resurrect] the repressive tools of the New Order model” it had
displayed “a growing impatience with liberal reform and an indifference towards human
rights.”

Outline of the book

As the case studies that follow demonstrate, progressive social movements have not only had
quite different experiences of Indonesia’s democratic trajectory, but also varying impacts on
its outcomes, depending on their focus, internal structures, ability to mobilize resources, and
engagement in the political sphere. Collectively, they have played a critical role over the last
two decades in ensuring that different groups of citizens can engage directly in—and benefit
from—the political process in a way that was not possible during the New Order. However,
their efforts have had different outcomes, with some playing a decisive role in the
destabilization of the regime and others serving as bellwethers of the advancement, or
otherwise, of Indonesia’s democracy in the decades since. Equally important,
democratization has affected social movements differently depending on the form taken by
each movement during the New Order period, their capacity to navigate the opportunities and
challenges presented by regime change, and the actions of successive democratically elected
governments but also of influential countermovements. As a consequence, some have
lessened in significance while others have attained new levels of influence.

The specific movements examined in this volume are the student movement; the
anticorruption movement; the labor movement; and movements consisting of agrarian
smallholders, the urban poor, progressive Muslims, women, gay and lesbian activists, and
people with disability. The first five of these movements contributed most to discrediting and,
ultimately, directly challenging the authoritarian regime. Their experiences since 1998 have
varied wildly, from that of the progressive student movement, which has largely dissipated, to
that of the labor movement which, despite facing ongoing challenges, has adapted much more effectively to its new context. The vast differences in movements’ trajectories demonstrate that it is not just the level of engagement of a movement prior to democratization that determines how a social movement responds to regime transition, but rather a far more complex set of factors involving institutional structures, resource opportunities, and policy decisions made by the new regime.

We begin with Yatun Sastramidjaja’s account of the student movement, which traces its fall from political vanguard to “orphans of democracy.” Heir to a long tradition of student struggle, student activists followed a similar path to student movements in other authoritarian societies, leveraging their privileged status to lead the campaign for democracy. From the late 1980s, they challenged the regime, fighting for land rights, organizing workers, and defying the government’s bans on leftist political activity. Despite successive waves of repression, it was the students, too, who led the 1998 protests calling for Suharto’s resignation and fundamental political reform. Suharto’s resignation was, as Sastramidjaja argues, undoubtedly a victory for the so-called 1998 Generation. But, having failed to capitalize on the momentum they had generated, students quickly retreated from the political fray, with only the Islamic student movement making a place for itself in the new Indonesia. By 2004, what remained of the left of the student movement had been relegated to margins, while moderate reformists have moved into government or into other social movements, leaving just a few aging activists clinging to the more radical dreams of an earlier age.

One of the issues taken up by former members of the student movement has been the fight against corruption, which had emerged as a unifying theme in the prodemocracy movement in the New Order. In chapter 2, Elisabeth Kramer illustrates how the corrupt activities of Suharto, his cronies, and his family fueled antigovernment sentiment, even though the movement itself did not take form until after 1998. The new freedoms of Indonesia’s reformasi era, combined with the backing of foreign donors, created space for the formation of new NGOs with the explicit mandate to oppose corruption. As Kramer explains, these NGOs played a central role in the formation of the Commission for the Eradication of Corruption (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK) in 2003 and the defense of it against attacks from 2009. The movement also developed a presence at a local level, in response to the proliferation of corruption as a result of decentralization. As she reveals, these local movements have had mixed success, struggling with a lack of resources. Ultimately, however, the most significant obstacle the anticorruption movement faces is the lack of support from the elite level, because without it the movement remains constrained by a political system that fosters corruption.

Unlike the student movement, the labor and the land rights movements were not central players during the actual moment of regime change. However, their actions in the preceding decade made a decisive contribution to the delegitimization of the regime, as Teri Caraway and Michele Ford demonstrate in chapter 3. Struggling to regain a foothold after the decimation of independent labor unions in the massacres of 1965 and repression in the decades that followed, worker activists and their middle-class allies nevertheless clawed their way back, raising awareness at home and abroad of the Indonesian government’s unrelenting subjugation of labor rights in its search for economic growth and political stability. Having been forced to accommodate some of the labor movement’s demands in the early 1990s, the government struck back, all but destroying the alternative labor unions that
had emerged in the intervening years. As a consequence—and in contrast to many other democratic transitions—there was little evidence of worker mobilization in the immediate lead-up to the fall of Suharto. While continuing to grapple with the ongoing obstacles of low density of unionization among workers, organizational fragmentation, and political isolation, the labor movement has since asserted itself economically and politically.

Chapter 4 deals with land rights, which have long been a matter of contention in Indonesia. As Iqra Anugrah argues, a wave of peasant protests in the late Suharto period—and, in particular, a series of high-profile land disputes—not only gave rise to a series of regional peasant unions but also helped destabilize the regime. Like the labor movement, the peasant movement played little or no part in the actual moment of regime change. But, also like the labor movement, peasant movements have since worked to make use of the new political spaces made available to them by democratization. As the movement for land rights has evolved, it has been forced to broaden its repertoire of action from traditional modes of contentious politics, such as mass mobilization, to include tactics such as critical knowledge production, engagement in electoral politics, and a range of economic strategies. Anugrah concludes, however, that—despite its dynamism and some success in the policy arena—the movement failed to mount an effective challenge to the dominance of Indonesia’s political and economic elites in this domain.

The final chapter in this first cluster examines the movement for the rights of the urban poor. As Ian Wilson explains in chapter 5, the urban poor played a significant role in the protests that brought down Suharto. Then, after 1998, some organizations emerged that supported the urban poor in their efforts to reform their local communities. But there was no coherent movement during the New Order, nor has there been since. Instead, the urban poor have had to look after themselves, engaging in the politics of the everyday and using defensive forms of action to protect their gains and respond to impending threats. The most significant change since democratization has been the recognition of the urban poor as a voting constituency. Nevertheless, in the absence of a political party with a particular and demonstrated interest in the politics of the poor, activism in support of the urban poor remains fragmented and confined primarily to individual rather than collective action.

The next three chapters focus on identity-based movements, which have been deeply affected by the rising conservatism that has characterized Indonesia’s democratic recession. As these chapters reveal, the progressive Islamic movement, the women’s movement, and the movement for gay and lesbian rights have all been forced to negotiate, with varying levels of success, the rise of conservative Islamic counter-movements. These cases illustrate the critical challenges faced by social movements that focus on aspects of personal identity that challenge the agendas of these conservative Islamic forces, which have been able to use Indonesia’s democratic structures to their advantage. These movements were all able to achieve significant gains in the early stages of Indonesia’s democracy. However, it was precisely these early successes that subsequently led to their persecution by conservative opponents.

One of the paradoxes of democratization is that the progressive Islamic movement—which had played such an important role in its genesis—quickly became a casualty of the increasing dominance of conservative Islamic forces. As Greg Fealy explains in chapter 6, liberal Muslim intellectuals and activists had drawn on religious teachings to popularize and validate
political reform and human rights agendas from the late 1980s, thus preparing the way for Indonesia’s majority Islamic community to embrace democracy as an alternative to authoritarianism. The wealth of progressive Islamic thought and action that marked those decades, has, however, fallen victim to the illiberal aspects of reformasi. Fealy concludes that while liberal Islam flourished in New Order Indonesia because it had the support of the regime, it was unable to leverage that success in the face of broader religiocultural and political changes from the early 2000s, which have been driven by, and favored, conservative Islamist forces. In chapter 7, Rachel Rinaldo assesses the impact of the rise of these conservative Islamic countermovements on activism in support of women’s rights. As she explains, women not only played an important role in the push for democracy but were able to see through significant reforms for women during reformasi. But the same conditions that have made it possible for progressive women activists, religious and secular, to make these gains contributed also to the rise of conservative Islamic groups whose values are directly threatened by a vibrant women’s movement. Rinaldo argues that the movement’s ideological divisions and its inability to mobilize a mass base—along with the changes brought about by decentralization—have made it difficult for the progressive women’s movement to respond to more organized conservative forces.

In chapter 8, Hendri Wijaya and Sharyn Graham Davies examine the transformation of activism for lesbian and gay rights from an understated, but relatively secure, position in the heterosexist context of the New Order to a much more visible, but also vulnerable, movement. Lesbian and gay activists believed that democracy would improve their capacity to move beyond demands for inclusion and equal treatment to demands for acceptance, which initially proved to be the case. But democracy also created space for homophobic forces intent on eradicating public expressions of homo- sexual or queer identity. One reaction to this hostility—which reached the highest levels of government in 2016—was to retreat to the “safer” forms of activism characteristic of the New Order. As Wijaya and Davies demonstrate, however, activists have also responded by using digital media platforms to establish formal and informal networks and by reaching out to international organizations and to other Indonesian social movements with intersecting concerns.

The book’s final case study focuses on the disability movement, a relatively new movement that has managed to draw on the increased availability of foreign funding to capitalize on the democratic structures now in place in Indonesia. In chapter 9, Thushara Dibley writes about how the disability rights movement, which was at best embryonic in the late New Order period, has developed momentum since the Indonesian government signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007. After that time, the availability of international aid to support activities related to disability contributed to the formation of a number of new organizations that were then well placed to respond to the opportunities that democratization offered. In particular, these organizations have been able to take advantage of the opportunities to influence policy at both the provincial and national levels. Their success, argues Dibley, highlights how Indonesian democracy offers inclusive and participatory processes for people with disabilities to have direct input into policy decisions.

In reflecting on the trajectories of these different movements, Edward Aspinall takes a step back to focus on the challenges they face in postauthoritarian Indonesia in the concluding chapter. Having acknowledged the advances social movements have made individually and
collectively, he points to their structural weaknesses and failure to gain traction in the political arena as evidence of their enduring fragility.

This fragility, he argues, is a product of the patterns that continue to dominate Indonesian society, namely clientelism, the reliance of extralegal means to achieve political outcomes, and the ever-growing strength of rival political movements, which seek to mobilize the disenfranchised for different, and often antiliberal, ends. Aspinall contends that incrementalism is not sufficient in such circumstances if Indonesia’s progressive social movements wish to prevail. Instead, he concludes, they must continue to strive for “root-and-branch transformation of the social order,” with the goal of transforming Indonesia into a society based on ethical universalism, not particularism.

As the chapters in this book illustrate, democratization is “always and everywhere an unfinished process” (Beetham 1999, 159). Indonesia’s road to democracy has been a long one, which progressive social movements have experienced in quite different ways. As they have transformed themselves, moreover, their actions have influenced the way that the democratization process has played out. Despite the increasing influence of conservative countermovements, Indonesia’s democratic system offers progressive activists more opportunities to influence social attitudes and political outcomes than they had during even the most liberal years of the New Order. The outcomes of their efforts may have been uneven, but each one has continued to work to change the structures of Indonesian society in ways that make it more democratic, inclusive, and fair.

References


Notes

1 Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.
2 For a discussion of the tactics used by social movements in Southeast Asia, see Ford 2013.
3 As Escobar (1992) argues, distinctions between politically oriented and culturally oriented social movements are incremental, not absolute. This is especially true in emerging democracies where discrimination against different elements in society is enshrined in legislation or embedded in institutions or social practice. In such contexts, even social movements at the “cultural” end of that spectrum must engage politically.
4 For a general overview of the economic effects of the crisis see Hill 1999.
5 For early accounts of the events leading to the fall of Suharto, see Forrester 1998, and Schwarz 1999.